WE SLEPT HERE

Sierra DeMulder

AND IF I AM TO FORGIVE YOU

Who am I if I am not the aftertaste of abuse?
The offspring of your temper and your fat white pills?
I don't know what will be left of me if I dump the curdled milk down the drain.
Sometimes I just like to look at it,
open the fridge and let the cold
sharpen my skin.
Be someone
who bought milk once.
A poet told me to write about
you. Write it out, honey.
As if you were a fever or a horse to break.
As if you don't already show up, uninvited, unbeckoned, into every poem.
Your hand guides my wrist as I write this, even now.

MY SISTER REMEMBERS

the sharp, feral way our father spoke to the maker of his children.
How his whole face became a mouth.
How he hissed and spat and
huffed like a hell engine. How our
mother became more chair
than voice, her whole body an opening.
An echo chamber. How he
said words we did not know but knew were bad and would repeat
like gaudy hyenas to our cousins.
How we too became animals.
How she went limp as a snipped lily, a wax doll going soft next to
the stove. It is not that my father yelled and it is not that my mother
received his yelling. It is that we remember them like this,
in tandem, bound forever with ribbon,
a call and response. It is that
in our minds, one does not exist without the other.

A STUDY OF FORGIVENESS
AS A CHILD

She plays in the yard and waves at all the strangers. She loves juice and drinks it until it forms a river down the front of her belly, until a pink stain floats above her lip.
She is always naked the way adults can never be. Grown folk undress in the dark, slide the stocking of the day off but never the shame.
Forgiveness is too young to think nakedness is different. She dances
in the sprinkler, thumping her chest like a bible and howling like a puppy storm. We adults are afraid of what the world could do with her soft pelt.
Her openness. How we would gut her honesty, not like a buck but like an angelfish. Trophy it on our mantel.
When we catch her spoon-feeding a stranger or letting that man sip invisible tea from her cupped hands, we drag her inside by the wrist, scold her for being so damn gullible.
Hoard her away at the first sign of rain.

WHEN I SHOULD HAVE LEFT YOU

When we stopped fucking in bed.
Instead, hunched over like the sick on the side of the couch, the pool table, the front seat of your Cadillac.
It was no longer the passionate lovemaking of the newly obsessed attempting to crawl into each other's skin more the way a cat will play with a sparrow long after it is dead.
When I accidentally coughed up my tongue at the dinner table.
Out it fell like a piece of veal on the mashed potatoes. I hardly recognized it, I swallowed it so long ago.
When I realized I felt most in love with you when I was high, after you shared those pills with me, the chalky marbles prescribed to the terminally ill that made everything soft and slow.
Perhaps this was your gift to me.
Perhaps you knew all along—
like a surgeon placing the plastic mask over my mouth, counting back from twenty— that this was going to hurt.

I REMEMBER

The dull thump of a blue jay flying into our window.
The exact number of times the screen door bounced after my mother, a shapeless color, ran outside.
The dirty dishes, the act of cleaning away what's left, in the sink next to the featherless chicken and the empty empty empty bottles.
The smothered sound of shouting behind a door.
How we justified my father's anger— he had a long day. It's hot outside. It's not like he hit her.
Nights spent sliding the screen door open as soft and quiet as milk sitting in a glass.
A skinned deer on our front porch, a wind chime of muscle, and the buck knife soaking in the bathtub.
My father's tears, foreign ornaments, startling as the baby blue jays we found under the porch.

INTO THE DARK

He used to break his Ambien between thumb and forefinger as if pinching the head off a tick. Then, like a good mama bird, drop it into my chirping mouth. I liked these pills, this maternal ritual. In a way, it was gentle.
In a way, he gave me permission to leave, slip out of my body to a world in which he could not follow. Sometimes I would try to resist draw wildly in an old sketchbook until the last drop of gasoline was siphoned from the tank and I would sputter into dark.
Once, he found me on the couch, ignoring the heavy awning of sleep, penciling a flowered woman unlocking her mouth.
What a pretty picture, darling. The rope slipping from my fingers. What a pity, fix her, darling. The lantern sinking into the lake. What a gritty elixir, starling.
When I woke, the book was still open in
my lap. The woman's eyes were scratched out.
Her mouth stuffed with a sail. Leave. Leave!

1

2

During the worst of it, during the blur of Christmas-turned-New-Year's-turned-dull-January,uary, when we lived in his hometown, where there were only trees and fields and empty roads, where I was brought and kept without a car or a bicycle or a damn sled to leave on, where the closest neighbor was his grandfather, where we learned the worst of our love, where I wasn't allowed to use my phone or check my email, where I could reply but only if he was in the room, only if he was the one responding, where my hair started to fall out, where my period was late, where it came, sudden and dark, down my leg in his kitchen, where I deleted the worried texts from my friends while he slept, where one friend made for me a cypher through which we could speak, 1 = ARE YOU OKAY?, 2 = YES, 3 = NO, where he wouldn't look at me for hours, where I was so sure that I was disgusting, boiled down to bone, in my marrow, I deserved this, 1, when he made me fuck in the car, in the front seat, the moving car while he drove, 2, when he had a bad day, 2, when he had a good day, 2, when he would drink all the right drinks and take the right pills that would make him so sweet, when he was so sweet and honeysuckle sorry, when he turned back into a wolf, when I loved him this whole time.

A STUDY OF FORGIVENESS AS A PIÑATA

It is definitely an animal, but nobody can tell which kind. Half donkey, half rodeo clown. Part cow, part hummingbird. People only care what's inside, and how eventually it will be violently drawn out—the wild staggers of the blindfolded, how the body acts as a volume knob: the closer the swing, the louder the shrieks. That satisfying thud, aluminum against papier-mâché, dull and electric. In these years after you, I too have thrashed in the dark, have swung madly at sounds, have prayed for impact, or at least purpose. I confess I have noosed your memory, waved my bat like a shameful finger, waited beneath it, ready to collect my lump of closure.

Thump. I forgive you. Thump. I forgive you.

Thump. Thump. Thump. Thump.

Nothing ever falls out.

KNOCK KNOCK

who's there?
drug addict.
no, he is not.
who's there?
night out with yr man
night out with my man who?
needs a little kick, he says, snagged some faceless pills off a stranger, he says,
take one & l
take one.
knock knock?
who's there?
we gotta stagger back
to the hotel, undress, we are making desperate love, bodies stumbling down the ally of ourselves and
you drop
heavy as a carcass
mid fuck
might as well have been
knock knock
you come to & he
is getting dressed.
I wake up & don't know where I am
or how long you've been
asleep or why he is looking at me like that
black out.
black out who
not yet, silly.not yet, stupid. we gotta get drunk first.
knock knock
you just passed out
he is angry.
while we were fucking.
what did you expect him to do
just sit around and watch you sleep?
no wait, please,
I don't know what's wrong with
stones. I sink,

drown.
knock knock sleepy head
who's there?
please
who's there?
help
he left me left me.
1 am a heavy coat of paint. the room spins.
the paint fills my head.
my fingers
cotton balls. my eyelids
pockets of
wake up.
wake up who?
not yr legs. not
for a while. the side effects are worst in the morning.
I crawl to the shower
vomit under the hot rain.
he left me he left me
you say again and again
I am a ship with no helm, a graveyard with no dirt.
crows fill my stomach.
I dial his number.
where are you?
no where
knock knock what.
the joke is you stay for another six months.
the joke is
this is not enough
to make me
leave.

A STUDY OF FORGIVENESS
AS A ONE-NIGHT STAND

She wants to say it without thinking.
She wants to touch it without truly knowing who she is touching the stranger, the friend, the unimpressive barista who wants to show her his tapestry collection. Just let her give it without giving it. Let her say the words without opening her mouth.
I forgive youl forgive you she wants the quick high, the counterfeit, the oh god, the false idol. She wants to pray without believing. She wants to give you her body without being in the room.

O HOLY

How do you describe the feeling of waking up? Darkness, and then, not. Consciousness becomes the slow drawing of a bath. My mind begins to fill.
My senses trickle back from blackness.
Still dark, but lighter like drying paint.
I become aware of my surroundings shadow by shadow: the bed, the pillows, the sheets, the hands. Trees thrash against my hips, the window, but strange, there is no storm. Still shadows. Something is pushing, knocking at my body. How do you describe penetration? I become aware of the sliding, archaic thrust, the filling of what is bottomless. Consciousness now spills over the lip of the tub and I am drowning. Who are you?
I am awake, my body screams, awake, but my mouth does not remember itself.
Who are you? Nothing but shadow falls from my mouth. For what seems like a year, I do not know who is inside me.
Here is the light bulb. Here is the gasp of air.
It's you, you, you, my lover. O thank god.
O holy mistake. I realize that it is you and that I am safe and I cry fat, instant tears.
You pull out of me, confused, angry we stopped. I explain I was dreaming.
I explain people wake up entangled all the time, I just didn't know who I was tied to, didn't know who was knocking at the door of me. And see, even though we will still sleep beside each other for six more weeks, this is the exact moment you lose me: I tell you I thought I was being raped
and you ask me who I was dreaming of.
O holy abuser. O green-eyed wolf.
You say I moaned like a ghost
in my sleep, panted, pushed against you like a strung-back bow. You say I must want it from someone else.
To this day, this is what I think of when I think of you.

A STUDY OF FORGIVENESS
AS A PROCESS OR A SOCIOPATH

Except
this time is not about forgiveness.
Instead, how sometimes
I fantasize about actually physically hurting you. I have dreamt of kicking you, pulling out slivers of your hair, as if violence is the patron saint of healing cause damage to repair damage.
Anger lives so loud in the body.
The dirtiest of my heart enjoys picturing you alone. Wilted.
Soaking in a bathtub
of nails, swallowing one for each cruelty against me. And wouldn't that be just? Wouldn't that be so righteous?
Sometimes I think it would be
easier to forgive you
if you weren't so damn unscarred.

AND IF I DO NOT FORGIVE HIM

I have found an identity in its decoration. A profession in its preening. I polish it with sequined spit. Dress it in gowns skinned from his brokenness. Prance on it like a bear rug. My suffering: the artist's fodder, the cave I map endlessly. Lucky that his fault is so bountiful, a swollen cornucopia. I am fat off his wrong-doings. I am afraid I will be like this forever. I write I forgive you onto the paper. Again and again. Until the pen droughts. Until the page is no longer a page but a river. A lake. I write over the surface like a Jesus or a water bug.
I write until the letters do not form letters.
Until the paper is wet soil, or essentially a tree again. He hangs from its branches.
Not hanged. Not a wind chime. He is no singer. He is reaching for his ax. There is
a throne in the room where all mercy is made, and for now, I can sit on it. For now, he can't reach me up here. I fold the paper over itself like a building collapsing. Make it as small as a tongue. I am told I should give it to him.
I am told that forgiveness is a knife with no handle, not meant to be held, not built to be a prisoner. But why, dear reader, would I give my only weapon away?

ON ADMITTING YOU ARE AN ABUSE SURVIVOR

It will not happen the first time you forgive him. Or the second.
Or the third. It will not happen the fourth time you break down in public. A wine glass shatters at a dinner party and you leave without saying goodbye. A car door slammed across the empty parking lot becomes the animal urge to call him. It will not happen even as you write this poem-when you finally claim what happened to you as if it was a child you abandoned when you were too young to know better. You still can't bring yourself to call it by name. Are you afraid of how much it looks like you? How it has his mouth but your eyes. Say it:
I am an abuse survivor. Abuse survivor. Tell everyone how wrong your heart was. Share all the horrible things he did and then tell them how even now, you are not sure you wouldn't go back—if only to say I'm sorry one last time.

A STUDY OF FORGIVENESS
AS AN OLD WOMAN

Her back droops over itself like the handle of an umbrella.
Her feet resemble ginger root, knobby and dry. She walks for hours every day with him papoosed to her back like a tumor slow-dancing with her spine. Each day, she picks wildflowers; braids me a tiara from tickseed and baby's breath, crowns me Queen of the Fester. want to rest, she begs, you need to let it go. Again and again, I send her back to the road: Come home when he is different, I say.
Come back when you have found a better breed of me.

YOUR BEST

No matter where you are in life, no matter what you've contributed to creating...you are always doing the best you can with the understanding and awareness and knowledge that you have.
- Louise L. Hay
And if this was your finest
performance no dress rehearsal,
no amputated second act—
no longer would I grieve your potential. No longer
would I wait up for the return
of your soldiered goodness.
At first, I imagined addiction as your finest suit, hung in
the closet, ironed in the dark.
Now I see you had no other option, not even

your own skin, no summer
jacket or wool coat, only this.
The fine china of your temper,
the creased linens, the dirtiest
looks I had assumed were
brought out only for the most dazzling of dinner parties.
It was never a choice. There was
no other way for you to love me.
I knew no other way to be loved.

ON ADMITTING YOU ARE AN ABUSE SURVIVOR

It will happen when you try, so foolishly, to love another: this doe-eyed heart you found in the garden. He is soft and loud, but only when he is singing, only when he is laughing.
You catch yourself staring
at his teeth, his mouth, searching for that retractable silence.
Each night, you will try so hard to touch his face. Your fingers will shake. You will be crying and you will not know why
and it's not his fault. It's not his fault he is an un-swung axe.

STILL

He shows up sometimes when I am making love or cleaning the bathroom or thinking about the way time is a pendant sliding on a chain. Out of the blue smoke of my happiness, he will appear, and he will not fill me with fear like he used to and he will not name me soundless like he used to. Instead, I just stare, as gently as I can, at his gauntness. True, I did misplace myself.
True, he did become a forest that swallowed and swallowed but he was the lost one. Now, when
he comes back to me, he demands what I recognize as pity. In my dreams, he is old, thick with regret, filled with a thousand
voices but ashamed of all of them. In my dreams, he is a child. A golden little boy. He is always crying. He knows he has to do this all over again.

AFTER GOOGLING AFFIRMATIONS FOR ABUSE SURVIVORS

You have a fundamental right to a nurturing environment. Oh, what a home I have built in my skull. What a dark, savage forest. There is no furniture, no artisan humanity. No gentle place to undress my own thoughts.

You are a valuable human. I think about death too often. I eat peanut butter with my fingers. I pee in the shower. I am a mouthful. Not a swallow. Not a bird or a name gone sour in his mouth.

If you allow yourself to be mistreated, you are teaching that it is okay for others to abuse you. And look at this shining curriculum! The lessons I have been prepping for months! Now, class, take out your inner child. Tell her she is so selfish. Tell her she shouldn't have eaten the last of the truffles.

Tell her to take a good long look at love: her father gripping the throat of the payphone.

You cannot assume responsibility or accept blame for any abusive behavior. I am so sorry so sorry sorry so sorry he is so sorry sorry sorry so so sorry again and again the conductor lifts her baton and the musicians tilt their horns and the song begins again.

You do not have to feel guilty for allowing others to take care of themselves. But what do I do with all this leftover love?

My hands were built for crawling on.

How do I write myself gently? How do I not worship the shipwreck that stranded me here?

You are not a failure or less of a person because you make mistakes. I am not a failure or less of a person because I make mistakes. I write this until my hand becomes a beggar. I write this untill the words no longer sound like words, only sounds, and I can believe them now.

Your higher power is transforming your brokenness and gently carrying you from darkness into light. I believe in gentleness. Lord, I believe in light. I am my own higher power. I will carry myself out.

RELEASE IT

You are not the first to domesticate it.
Your shame: pretty as a house pet.
You bathe it nightly, comb its matted carpet. When will you stop letting it sleep in your bed? Some part of it comforts you-that dank heaviness curled at your feet like a birds nest of forks. When will you put it down?
End its reign, its gnarled suckling of your last good teat? You, on your knees, still. You, crawling out of that man's mouth, still. Let go of the fact that you were the other woman, once, twice. Lust spent like inheritance does not define you.
Let go of being made of want: yes, I ate all six macaroons on the sparkling streets of Budapest that night. I saved none for you. Sweetheart, shame has
been bound in your basement too long.
Release it. Your floorboards shudder at the thought of your belly, smooth as an apple, kissing flat against it.
Release it. Your hands are not as small as they used to be. Get up.
This is not who you are anymore.
Worth is not a well to be poisoned.
It is not a tumbler being filled or drank from by some audacious god, nor a monthly allowance we get when we are not not beautiful.
Drive to the ocean. No, drive to the Redwoods. Drive to whatever landmark most reminds you that becoming is a slow glory and leave your shame. It will not follow you home.

UNINHABITABLE

My father still lives in the house he built for my mother. He calls himself a bachelor, not a hoarder, but you can measure how long she's been gone using the piles of expired mail, the dishes, the sun-stained photos framed in dust. When he speaks of his recovery, he lowers his voice, even though he lives alone and it's just us at his cluttered kitchen table.
He tells me he isn't ashamed of what he did or where he has been or what he put my mother through, but I think he means that he does not allow himself the luxury of forgetting.
I am writing about you again today and I wonder, why dig up our sad corpse?
Why put the spleen back, a spoiled balloon, already burst, but here I am huffing life back into it. Nursing our fruitless love. Sometimes, I still can't believe it. That you happened
and I happened and this was the best we could do. Our nest of rubbish, our flowerless garden—we slept here. Made love among the bottles caps and ants and mold.
My father told me he still imagines getting back together with my mother, maybe someday, after her new husband dies. I think he means he started to build a house and left it unfinished.
What is it about this family that draws us back to the uninhabitable?

That compels us to make a bed where there isn't one.

AND IF I AM TO FORGIVE MYSELF

I am not afraid that he will happen again, but that I inevitably will.
My biggest fear is the belief that I am and always will be rotten, right down to my blueprints, unworthy of love, even one as sickly as this.
To forgive oneself is not only to admit fault, to recognize what land you tilled to grow here, but to also say (and somehow believe)
I did not deserve this. Neither did he.
I have always imagined forgiveness as a garden. A serene landscape with perfect paths and soft lighting, not a leaf out of place. But forgiveness cannot merely be an assembly of lovely things or the act of meandering pass.
It must be the mud also. It must be the weeds and the mosquitos and
the hundreds of miles it took you to walk there. It has to be showing up, finally, sweaty and sore, only to realize you went to the wrong fucking garden.
So here's to our blistered feet. Here's to my whimpering knees, your weary shoulders. Here is the foreclosure of my shame and here is to our brokenness. Look at us being so damn human: yes, it happened, yes, it was not our most graceful unfolding, and yes, we were both so present the whole time.